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The President and the Press

PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S request for greater self-restraint on the part of the American press presents a dilemma: It is too vague to be answered, but too important not to be.

It is vague because the President did not explain just how restraint could be practiced beyond that which exists today. It is important because, as Mr. Kennedy pointed out, the United States is at war—deeply engaged in a struggle to the death with the Soviet Union and its partners in international crime.

The situation was aptly summarized this week by Frank J. Starzel, the general manager of the Associated Press. "Any responsible publication," he said, "would refrain from knowingly disclosing information which damages or jeopardizes the national interest. The problem centers in distinguishing between that which might damage or jeopardize and that which does not.

"A self-censorship such as President Kennedy implicitly proposes depends upon newsmen having available guidance from responsible government officials who also will take the responsibility for the effects and results of their decisions."

The failure of last week's anti-Castro expedition brought this problem to a head. Officials of the Kennedy Administration have been highly critical of what they called "irresponsible" stories in the U. S. press about invasion plans, CIA involvement and the attack itself. Perhaps some of the reporting about the Cuban operation was not completely responsible.

But if President Kennedy's speech in New York was intended to place a share of the blame for the failure on the U.S. press—or if the speech is so interpreted—a mistake is being made.

Fidel Castro did not have to be told by American newspapers that Cuban exiles were preparing to strike at his regime; the infiltration of anti-Castro forces by a single agent would have informed him. It long has been impossible to hide such preparations for military action, even on a relatively small scale.

President Kennedy's criticism that "details of this nation's covert operations have been available to every newspaper reader", is, therefore, more a criticism of the organizers of "covert" operations than it logically can be of the press. It is difficult to believe that the President meant to suggest that the American people should not be told facts about our government which our enemies know—and say they know.

No clearcut guidelines can be drawn as to what adversely affects national security unless tight, involuntary censorship is imposed on all communications media—a censorship that would encompass more than standard military matters, since the undeclared world war is being fought on many nonmilitary fronts.

Such censorship would mean the death of freedom of the press in the United States. Is the nation ready to pay this price in the name of national security? We think not. The alternative, it seems to us, must involve two things:

First, a determination on the part of the press to apply diligently the test of national security to newsgathering activities—on an individual basis.

Second, action by the government to clean up its own information house by applying the same test far more carefully than in the past—and without using "national security," as it so often is used, as an excuse for sweeping executive fumbling under the rug.

Neither government nor the press will find it easy to apply these tests prudently and with the proper regard for both the national security and the people's right to know. But we have the word of the President that the "danger . . . requires a change in outlook, a change in tactics, a change in missions—by the government, by the people, by every businessman, union leader and newspaper." He must be taken at his word.